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Research Materials/Source Documents  
STUDENT PAPERS

FILE TITLE: History of the USAF First Sergeant

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BACKGROUND PAPER  
ON  
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE FIRST SERGEANT

1. The Air Force's enlisted corps is the key to mission accomplishment. The First Sergeant is the pulse keeper of the enlisted corps. The Air Force First Sergeant is one of the few positions that has been around for the life of the Air Force. More rare is the fact that the position's duties haven't changed much over those fifty years: take care of the troops. The position of the First Sergeant has significantly shaped the quality of life for our young troops. The history of the United States First Sergeant is a story that needs to be documented for the future enlisted.

2. As with many of our traditions and organizations, the position of First Sergeant came from the Prussian Army. A parallel position in the 17th century Prussian Army, the Feldwebel, was very similar to the position we know as First Sergeant today. The highest ranking enlisted troops "...were the overseers of the company's enlisted personnel." Their duties included many of those of current day First Sergeants. In some respects the job was more operational than today. Much more in line with the Army's First Sergeant, the Feldwebel or company's sergeant, ensured that the enlisted personnel were performing their duties and training was being accomplished. Some of the more obscure duties included bed checks and physically administering punishment. The Feldwebel was the only NCO allowed to strike a soldier. He would administer one to four blows from the cane he carried for disciplinary infractions. (1:1-2) This was a grave responsibility and the Feldwebel needed to be careful to deliver this justly. When we developed our own army, the Feldwebel position became our key enlisted position.

3. During the formation of the Continental Army under General George Washington, the First Sergeant was the critical position in ensuring that the mission was being met and the troops were housed and fed adequately. They also kept the handwritten alpha roster. The data in this document included the troop's name, age, height, place of birth, and prior occupation of all enlisted. This document was replaced with the Morning Report in the early 1900's. (1:2)

4. In the early 1830's, a couple of significant changes occurred concerning the First Sergeant. They began to be identified by a red sash around their waist. Also, an 1833 pay scale established the First Sergeant's pay at \$15 per month. This compared to \$12 for the other sergeants. In 1944, a First Sergeant's pay was up to \$185 and today it's around \$2,000.(1:3) Pay and special insignia weren't the only signs that they were considered important to mission accomplishment. The leadership of the Army and the Air Force have always held the First Sergeant position in high regard. Colonel Charles A. Romeyn, U.S. Army, printed in the Calvary Journal in July 1925:

"After many years effort, we at last got our First Sergeants a big increase in pay. Yet, I believe we have not gone far enough. They are the most important enlisted person in the Army, give them the most pay and I almost feel like making all Second Lieutenants salute them. The ones I have worked with in the past and many others, I would gladly give the first salute. The First Sergeant is the Captain's Chief of Staff. A poor one will ruin a good troop no matter what kind of Captain they have. And many a poor Captain has had his reputation saved and his troop kept, or made good, by a fine First Sergeant."(1:4) And CMSAF (Ret) Robert D. Gaylor said: "A good First Sergeant was worth more than his weight in gold, a good First Sergeant who really cared for people. He'd rip your knickers if you were out of line, but if you had a problem, he was the one to go to....You appreciated what a good First Sergeant was like."(5:88)

5. The First Sergeant had always been the ranking person in the unit and could directly affect the direction of the unit. This changed drastically with the creation of the supergrades, E-8 and E-9. The First Sergeant was not the ranking enlisted anymore and there were role conflicts. As Gen Low Allen, Jr said in his oral interview:

"this created a real problem in the mid-level NCO grades and particularly for the First Sergeant position in that these super grades often times have jurisdiction and outrank the First Sergeant in many cases"(6-115)

6. The long standing symbol of the first sergeant career field is the diamond in the chevrons. The first sign of the diamond device, the lozenge or French diamond, was in the Army Uniform Regulation in 1847. As the Air Force became an independent service the diamond of the Army First Sergeant was lost again. It surfaced again in May 1954 as a proposal and was adopted later that year as an authorized uniform rank and it has been around ever since.(2:13)

7. Early years of the Air Force brought other new changes for the first sergeant. First sergeant became a position rather than a rank. The 731X0 was the first AFSC attached to the field for E-6s or above. In the late 1960's, the AFSC changed from 10070 to 10090 and allowed entry by personnel from any career field. Up to this time, many AFSCs were not allowed to retrain as First Sergeants. In April 1971, Technical Sergeants were deleted as an authorized grade for entry into the First Sergeant field.

8. To better prepare First Sergeants for their job as enlisted leaders, the Air Force developed a 4-week school for specialized training.(3:18) The Air Force First Sergeant's Academy was opened at Keesler AFB in 1973.(4:150) It wasn't mandatory when it first opened but later became mandatory in 1976. In a survey of First Sergeants, many felt this was worth six months experience.

9. Historically the First Sergeant has been called by other names, such as Top and Shirt. The term Top came from the Army's First Sergeants being called Top Sergeant. While Shirt came from the Calvary Army days. When the supply wagon came, the First Sergeant was always allowed the first pick from the supplies.(7) Sort of a fringe benefit for all the extra work it took to take care of the troops.

10. As you can clearly see, the first sergeant has always been an integral part of our Air Force organization. The history of the First Sergeant is long and illustrious and the Air Force is a better place to work and live today because of their efforts.

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